



What is your Word?

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
September 8, 2019 Luke 4:14-21, 2 Corinthians 5:17-21*

Today marks the beginning of a particular journey I'm inviting the people of St John's to consider making together. In a certain sense that's overstating things, because some of you have already been journeying together in many ways, some of you for a long time, and I'm still the new kid on the block. The particular journey I'm inviting us to make together is an exploration of the Christian spiritual path through seven spiritual practices that we can learn about and engage as a community. We can refer to these seven spiritual practices collectively as steps on "the Way of Love" that was inaugurated by Jesus of Nazareth 2000 years ago. The Way of Love seven practices are being engaged by Episcopalians throughout the United States and Latin America, under the guidance of our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. So there is a giant collection of people all doing the same thing. The seven practices are these: Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, Rest.

At St. John's, we are going to actually have a sermon series on each of the seven practices. The same day as the sermon, we will also have a conversational adult forum led by a St John's parishioner between the services at 10am so we can learn more about the practice. That week we will also publish a blog post on our website

by yet another St John's person who has agreed to be a guinea pig and try out the practice and write about their experience about it. Our website now has an entire page devoted to the Way of Love and all kinds of resources about it.

But why in the world are we doing this? Why does it matter and what difference could it possibly make in our lives as individuals and as a community? Why should you care? Honestly?

For me personally to be excited by any program or practice or journey, I have to know where it's going. This Way of Love we're going to practice is a journey, but what is its destination? To answer that I think we have to dig even deeper and say, what is Christian faith really about? So I've been thinking about this question a lot. Why we come to church really ought to be about more than the community, even though the community is great or can be great. When I stop to consider why I became a priest, why I love this path, it's because to me the essence of the Way of Jesus is about healing and reconciliation. It's about Jesus the Healer. When I came back to church after a long absence, I only came back intending to be at church one Sunday to receive communion and then leave. During the service I remember praying for healing to a God I wasn't sure I even believed in because I felt defective in lots of parts of my life. Somehow through a combination of the liturgy and the scripture what I felt God was saying to me was that I wasn't defective, I was just hungry. I felt encountered by kindness, and love, and somehow I got caught up into a current much larger than myself, a current I now call the Holy Spirit. That experience was only ten

years ago. Now by some miracle I'm a priest. So for me the heart of Christian faith is about healing; it's about reconciliation with myself, God, and other people. This is the destination toward which our journey is pointing.

As part of the way of love launch, I invited the St John's preachers, who are after all doing a sermon series on the seven Way of Love practices, to meet and talk about the Way of Love. I excitedly shared with them my idea that Christian faith is about reconciliation and healing. But those words didn't necessarily resonate with them. You may not resonate with those words. You may not relate to the story I just told about how I got caught up into this spiritual path.

So I asked the preachers if they could tell me in one word what the heart of Christian faith was about for them. They all gave me permission to share their answers with you. Heidi Joos' word is "home." As a lesbian woman who has been creating family with her wife Ivy for many years, long before society figured out it was OK for gay people to love each other, they had to hide their experience of being home with and for each other. Finally at St. John's they found a place they could call home because it was safe for them, because the Way of Jesus is about a radical love of all people.

Shane's word is "with"—that God in Christ is not far away but is with us, closer than our own breath. The word "with" means that at no point in our lives are we ever alone. That is what the Way of Jesus is about for Shane. Rex's word is "koinonia"—a Greek word that means communion with each other, a radical intrinsic togetherness through God's Spirit that defies our culture's extreme individualism. John Bellaimey's word, and Steve Schewe's word, is "love." As our Presiding Bishop says, if it's not about love, it's not about God.

So all of us have our different words that express to us, each in our individual ways and from our personal experience, what the Way of Jesus is about and where it's going. And I think the gospel text from today is about the same thing. In it, Jesus has just started his public ministry. Hardly anyone even knows who he is yet. He goes to the synagogue of his hometown, and he proclaims his manifesto. It's his mission statement, what he believes God has appointed him to be and to do. And he says this:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'*

Do you notice that Jesus is not implementing a one-size-fits-all restoration? He is meeting people where they are and giving them

what they need so that they can be free to love and be loved. A blind person needs sight. An oppressed person needs to go free. A captive needs release. The year of God's favor was a general amnesty where all debts are forgiven, and slaves freed.

So many times in the gospel texts, Jesus meets people, heals them, and then says, "Go. Your faith has saved you." In Greek saving means the same thing as healing. But healing also is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. It's about God healing what is sick, or broken, or hurt. And for each one of us as individuals, and for each community and nation, those things are different. But in the end, as God in Christ meets us for where we are at personally, God in Christ grants reconciliation to ourselves, to God, to others, to the earth—because in the end Christian faith is all about love.

So if you're willing, I'd like to ask you to close your eyes and think about your own life. What is your one word that captures what you think the Way of Jesus is about—the word that meets you where you are right now? If you just honestly don't know, that's OK. What do you wish it was about? What would truly be good news to you? What is it that you most need?

pause

Please hold on to whatever you came up with. I'm going to ask you to write it down later in this service.

A woman came to me at one point in my life as a minister and told me that a few months earlier, she had finally decided to go to a

twelve step program for an issue she had been struggling with her whole life. She said it was profoundly uncomfortable for her. But what she found in that group, consistently, time after time, is that the people there treated her with unconditional kindness. She said it was this kindness that changed her life. She had never had that experience before. After that she began to be open to considering whether God or spirituality might help her, even though she had previously been completely agnostic. It was unconditional kindness that changed her life.

Our practice of the Way of Love—these seven practices we’re going to engage this fall and learn about—is not worth anything unless it is leading us to transformation that frees us to love and be loved like the people in that twelve step group. These seven practices are just doorways into a different terrain. The doorways aren’t important; the terrain, the destination, is what is important. So wherever you are on the spiritual journey, whether you’ve been a committed Christian your whole life or a committed agnostic or allergic to commitment of any kind, I’d invite you to practice these seven simple verbs together, heading toward love, heading toward reconciliation, heading toward whatever the word is that captures the way you need God in Christ to meet you. These practices are broad enough to include you wherever you are, as you are.

Together, we are invited to make a journey. The steps of the journey are: Turn, Learn, Pray, Worship, Bless, Go, and Rest. The

journey is heading toward reconciliation, healing, home, God
“with” us, koinonia, love, unconditional kindness.

God yearns to free you to love and be loved. God joins us on the
Way of Love. God leads us in the Way of Love. It is the Way of Love
that will change the world. Amen.